



Tracing Ancestry in British Merchant Marine Records and Indexes

By

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Research in British Merchant Maritime records can be a formidable task. Records are extensive and some of them lie in various records repositories. However, the vast majority of the records of which can provide critical genealogical information on the average seaman or “rating”, are housed at The National Archives at Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, United Kingdom. Some maritime records may be held at the County Record Offices (CRO’s), and various libraries such as the Guildhall Library, the General Register Office, the Liverpool Library (see below). The Family History Library has microfilmed several groups of these records as well. Some are even available through the Newfoundland Maritime History Group who have also indexed many of their British records. And, some are held at the Maritime Museum at Greenwich, Kent.

To use British merchant marine (maritime) records, be certain to check for ancestry in 1) indexes, and/or 2) alphabetically arranged registers, first!

There range of years 1857 to 1913 are indexed but only to a limited extent. See especially the CLIP project (below) for further information for this time period.

To more quickly find your merchant maritime (seaman) ancestor, this overview on the British “Board of Trade” (BT) series records housed at The National Archives, and other record sources held elsewhere, may prove helpful.

After using the index, the more complete information found in an original merchant marine record usually proves to be the most helpful strategy for success as you seek to find all the available data about your Merchant seaman ancestor. The clarifying information found in these original records, may help you prove (or disprove) maritime ancestral connections.

Here are the keys to those codes used in this study, denoting the record repositories in which most merchant marine records lie:

TNA = records held at The National Archives, Richmond, Surrey, UK; GRO = original certificates/records at General Register Office; FHL = denotes Family History Library holdings in Salt Lake City, UT, USA; GhL = Guildhall Library, London, GRO = General Register Office, Kew, Surrey, UK; and SOG = the Society of Genealogists, London; Note: In some cases the first FHL film number is cited below to help you find all filmed collections in the Family History Library Catalog more easily. Just type it in, in the “Film Number Search” in order to call up the complete catalog entry for the whole record series’ film numbers, i.e.

Indexes to Records

1. 1780-1854 – Index to Trinity House Petitions of widows and children of merchant sea masters & captains: see [at SoG's website](#); also [FMP has from 1787-1854](#)
2. 1835-1844 - [BT119 is index](#) to the BT112 Registers of Seamen's Services; these contain a wealth of info; at TNA; see FHL film #1483304
3. 1835 to 1857 - An index covering the years by surname. But before and after these years, one must know the name of the ship; see at: <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-Records/britain-merchant-seamen-1835-1857>
4. [1837-1965 - Indexes Merchant Marine births](#) at GRO, FHL fiche #6137189
5. 1837-1965 - Indexes for Merchant Marine deaths at GRO; FHL fiche #6137191
6. [1845-1854 - BT114 Alphabetical Register of Seamen's Tickets](#) at TNA, FHL (see FHL #1502069); index in first several film scans, with certificate no.'s following
7. 1851-1911 - Lloyd's Captains' register: containing the names and services of certified masters of the British Mercantile Marine: <http://bit.ly/2EcbVEH>
8. 1857-1913 – the [CLIP project group](#) are indexing this least indexed time period
9. 1857-1860 – [Indexes to BT98 records \(Agreement & Crew Lists from](#) TNA; FHL (see FHL film #848097-on)
10. 1850-1888 – BT127 is an index to BT121-126 and these give lots of info
11. 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891 – Census Indexes for seaman/masters at mostly British home ports: <http://bit.ly/2FkEvD5BT154>
12. 1861 - an alphabetical listing of [Merchant Navy vessels and their masters and mates](#) – at TNA, and FHL (see film #847934)
13. 1863 to 1914A general index to [Crew Lists](#), is on FHL fiche #6200101-6200115 & 1913-1938 on fiche #6334929-6334930 St. John's Newfoundland : Memorial University of Newfoundland. Maritime History Group; index to ships only; must read and follow the "Instructions" in the first fiche at very top to view the crew lists)
14. 1851 - [Seaman's crewlists, PRO BT98](#):
 - Men on vessels registered in the ports of Cornwall--Falmouth, Fowey, Padstow, Penzance, St. Ives, Scilly Isles and Truro TNA, FHL
 - [Seaman's crewlists, PRO BT98, 1851, men on vessels registered in the ports of Scotland South-East](#)—Alloa ((Clackman.), Borrowstounness (Bo'ness, W. Lothianshire), Kirkcaldy (Fifeshire), Grangemouth (Stirlingsh.), Leith (Midlothianshire), and Perth TNA, FHL
 - [Seaman's crewlists, PRO BT98, 1851, men on vessels registered in the ports of Angus](#)--Arbroath, Montrose, and Dundee TNA, FHL
 - [Seaman's crewlists, PRO BT98, 1851, men on vessels registered in the ports of Aberdeenshire](#)--Aberdeen and Peterhead TNA, FHL
15. 1893-1972 - BT334 – Index to Board of Trade civil registration of births, and deaths of passengers and seamen at sea
16. 1913-1965 – Index to BT372: search for sailors serving previous to and after 1913, at

[NA catalogue](#)

Many ship masters in the Merchant maritime industry served the Royal navy as sea captains, and commanders. Their names may in the excellent indexed records of the Admiralty records series at the National Archives. Here are some of the best of Admiralty (Adm) records to consider—which sometimes bear the names of merchant maritime sea masters and captains;

1. 1695-1742 – [Index to Commission & Warrant papers](#) Adm 6, pt 1-3
2. 1766-1822 – [Admiralty Muster Books – Adm 36](#) & [Admiralty Muster Books Adm 37](#); these give name of sailor, date of discharge, volunteered or pressed (drafted), place/county of birth, age, reason for discharge
3. 1675-1822 – [Index to Bounty Papers, Adm 106](#)

Original Records Post-1835

Maritime records were the responsibility of the Board of Trade (BT) and are housed at TNA. Many of these records at the FHL are microfilmed and now scanned (mostly) and made available online or through the Family History Library and its satellite centers worldwide.

The following record series documents are critical to researching merchant marine records:

Masters and Captains:

- [BT115 - Masters' lists, contain alphabetical listing 1845-1854](#) TNA, FHL see #1562758
- [BT120 - Register of Seamen series I from 1835-1836](#) TNA, FHL see film #1483219
- [BT112 - Register of Seamen, Series II from 1835-1844](#) TNA, FHL see film #1502079; see BT119 (an index, first)
- BT114 - alphabetical Register of Seamen's tickets, 1845-1854
- BT113 - [Register of seamen's tickets, 1845-1854 \(BT113\)](#) TNA, see FHL film #1502069
- [BT116 - Register of Seamen series III from 1853-1857](#) TNA, FHL see film #1562727; each register has an index
- [1837-1930 - Marine Register Book - Births](#) TNA, FHL see fiche #6137268
- [1837-1965 Marine Register Book - Deaths](#) TNA, FHL see fiche #6137189
- [1839-1867 Index to Informal certificates of births at sea](#) TNA, FHL see fiche #6137267
- Certificates of Competency and Service of Masters and Mates, 1850-1888 - BT121-127, all at TNA:
 - Certificates of Competency of masters & mates, Foreign Trade BT122
 - Certificates of Service of masters and mates 1850-1884, Foreign Trade BT124
 - Certificates of competency of masters and mates, Home Trade BT125
 - Certificates of service of masters and mates, Home Trade BT126 1854-1888
 - Certificates of competency of masters and mates of steamships Foreign Trade 1881-1895 – BT123
 - Certificates of competency of masters, mates, Colonial – BT128 (indexed in BT127)
 - Certificates of competency of engineers, Colonial – BT140 (indexed in BT141)
 - Indexes to all (see exception as noted) the above “Certificates” of service and competency are in BT127. Note: The above five series form a single numerical sequence and the particular series in which the name entry falls determines which BT series to search for the original maritime record as follows:

- 1 to 34,999 are in (BT122)
- 35,000 to 79,999 are in (BT124)
- 81,000 to 99,999 are in (BT122)
- 100,000 to 119,999 are in (BT125)
- 120,000 to 135,453 are in (BT126)
- 0500 to 034,999 are in (BT123)
- 001 to 00,999 are in (BT123)
- Officer Name Index are in (BT127)
- Colonial registers are in (BT128 & 140) are listed under
- colony and port; and numerical thereafter
- Certificates of competency and service, skippers and mates of fishing boats are in BT129, BT130, & BT138 from about 1880-1908
- Index to Certificates of competency and service, skippers and mates of fishing boats is in BT138
- 1852-1889 Registers of Wages and Effects of Deceased Seamen are in BT153, TNA; see below
- 1853-1889 Indexes to Seamen's Wages, pouches and effects are in BT154, TNA
- 1854-1890 Registers of Births, Deaths and Marriages of Passengers at Sea are in BT158, TNA FHL
- 1855-1889 Indexes to Ships' Names are in BT155, TNA
- 1857-1972 Records of Marriages at Sea, RSS
- [Register of deaths at sea of British nationals, 1875-1888--BT159](#), TNA, FHL (see FHL film #1483314)
- [1875-1891 Registers of Births of British Nationals at Sea, BT160](#), TNA FHL (see FHL film # 1483321)
- 1882-1888 Registers of Seamen's Deaths classified by cause, BT157, TNA
- 1886-1890 Monthly Lists of Deaths of Seamen are in BT156, TNA
- 1891-1972 Registers and Indexes of Births, Marriages and Deaths of Passengers and Seamen at Sea are in BT334, TNA
- 1939-1946 Inquiries into causes of Deaths at Sea, RSS
- [Agreement, Crew Lists Agreements, crew lists and muster rolls of merchant vessels registered at Irish sea ports 1850-1921](#) : with card indexes, 1863-1921 TNA, FHL see film #1952199)
- [British Nationals births, marriages and deaths at sea 1854-1890](#) GRO, (see FHL film #1419469
- [Register of births at sea of British nationals, 1875-1891](#) GRO, FHL see film #1483321
- [Register of deaths at sea of British nationals, 1875-1888](#) GRO, FHL see film #1483315
- [Lloyd's Captains Registers \(shipping\) contain masters' and mates names](#), the name & number of each ship GhL, FHL see film #1482933
- [Lloyd's Register of British & Foreign Shipping](#) GhL, FHL - see fiche #6053007)
- See the Miramar Ship Index site under Websites

Finding Pre-1835 Merchant Seamen:

This is the most challenging time period in which to find genealogical information on merchant maritime ancestry.

Before 1835, if you don't know name of ship or port to which he sailed, search the following records for clues: parish registers, civil registration, diaries, letters, census, wills, or in the Trinity House Petitions, census index (1861 index on fiche #6025599 which may have some clues on pre-1835 born crewmembers); newspapers in the port towns give ships' sailings (give the names of ships. Failing these, then you must search—

- Agreement and Crew Lists ship registers (BT98), by port: The ship registers in this huge collection of over 5000 microfilms contain the name, age, length of service and sometimes the birthplace and the port of sailing for each master, mate and sailor. To search, you'll need to at least know a port and approximate year your ancestor sailed to or from. See film #870059 in the FamilySearch Catalog (click "Microfilm number" to view all ports and their years with registers on microfilm)
- Trinity House petitions: a calendar of the records of the Corporation of Trinity House FHL book #942 U3tr – use this book to trace the following two series of Trinity House records
 - [Corporation of Trinity House records, 1609-1950](#) on 26 GhL, FHL see film #1966898
 - [Trinity House Petitions \(Pensions applications by masters' widows\) FHL film 1787-1854](#) GhL, FHL - on 57 FHL films; see film #395554

Hospital Records for Merchant Seamen:

- [Royal London Hospital 1740-2000+](#) or, as it was once called--the London Infirmary—records are currently kept at the hospital of [St Thomas Hospital, Lambeth, \[was\] a.k.a. Dreadnaught Seamen's Hospital](#)
- Seaman's Hospital Society – a charity-based society seeking the welfare of all sickly and debilitated mariners and sailors (many Royal Naval boatswains would shift over to the merchant maritime after war campaigns)

East India Office Marine Department

See Family History online catalog's "Keyword" search on the following search terms—"East India" and "Marine Department"

There are good collections on these records for each British East India Presidency (Bengal, Bombay and Madras)

Websites with Indexes:

The following web sites have databases of seafarer's names:

1. Swansea (Glamorganshire, Wales) Mariners - 49,000 entries from Swansea crew lists at: <http://www.swanseamariners.org.uk/>
2. Cardiff Mariners - 1,500 entries from Cardiff crew lists at: www.cardiffmariners.org.uk
3. Here's an online site with modest amounts of names (in databases) for merchant mariners into North America and Canada from early (about 1650 to 1850): <http://www.mun.ca/mha/holdings/yms/yms.php>
4. Cardiff, Wales' Master mariners' website containing crew agreements:
5. <http://www1.somerset.gov.uk/archives/database/crewlist.htm>

6. <http://www.angelfire.com/ga/BobSanders/SEAMEN.html>
7. Welsh Mariners - 23,500 Welsh Master Mariners at: www.welshmariners.org.uk
8. Guernsey Crew Lists - see Foote's index of Guernsey Crew Lists at: <http://history.foote-family.com/maritime/index.php>
9. Mariners and Ships in Australian Waters - Index from the New South Wales
 - a. Inwards Passenger lists (includes crew members) at: <http://mariners.records.nsw.gov.au/>
 - b. <https://www.familyhistorycentre.com.au/immigrationpassenger-lists.html>
10. Here's the digital images to births, marriages and deaths at sea from 1837 onward that includes some records of master mariners and their children: www.findmypast.co.uk
11. [Crew Lists 1861-1913](#) with 270,000+ records at www.findmypast.com
12. Canadian (Engl.) Merchant mariners online (190,000 names):
 - <http://www.mun.ca/mha/holdings/names/index.php> - Seamen
 - <http://www.mun.ca/mha/holdings/captains/index.php> - Captains
 - <http://www.mun.ca/mha/holdings/genealog.php>
13. Here's post-1913 'seamen's pouches' 1913 to 1972; are in BT372 available via TNA's Catalogue online; many pre-1913 seamen listed; type BT372 in the "Department/Series Code box", then the ancestor's surname:
 - <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue/search.asp>
 - see also: <http://www.crewlist.org.uk/findingonindexes.html#online>
14. [Miramar Shipping Index](#) website – from early 1800's to at least the 1860's; then see Lloyd's Register of Shipping to obtain the ship number and sometimes the name

Other Maritime Online Resources:

The following websites provide further reading and instruction on using merchant maritime records of Great Britain:

- <http://www.allatsea.co.za/>
- <http://www.rootsweb.com/~wlscfhs/swshipping.htm>
- Here is the National Merchant Maritime website (Greenwich): <http://www.nmm.ac.uk/leaflets/Riindex.asp>
- Commonwealth Wargraves Commission website contains an online database of the deaths of those engaged serving in the Merchant Maritime service in World Wars I & II. Go to: <http://www.cwgc.org/>
- Here's a ship index online listing old and contemporary ships. There are now over 100,000 ship names in the index: <http://www.shipindex.org/>
- Wills before 1858 were proved by the Prerogative Court of Canterbury and are online at: www.ancestry.co.uk
- Many merchant mariners proved wills in the [Archdeaconry Court of London](#)
- Bank of England Wills (59,000); since some master mariners were so closely associated with and immersed in the mercantile trade, try these wills; indexed at: www.findmypast.co.uk

FHL Collections & UK Archives collections with references to Births, Marriages and Deaths at Sea:

Search the National Archives (UK) and/or the Family History Library Catalog (FHL) online for the following records:

Agreements and crew lists of British merchant vessels, compiled at English sea ports, including names of ships and service records of crew members: with alphabetical and numerical index to ships, 1857-1860 FHL, TNA

Agreements, crew lists and muster rolls of British merchant vessels, compiled at English sea ports, including names of ships and service records of crew members, 1747-1856, TNA, FHL (Over 5,000 films.)

Agreements, crew lists and muster rolls of merchant vessels registered at Irish sea ports 1850-1921: & card indexes, 1863-1921, & other finding aids FHL, TNA

Agreements, crew lists and muster rolls of merchant vessels registered at Northern Ireland sea ports, 1863-1914 FHL, TNA

Alphabetical register of masters, 1845-1854--class BT115 FHL, TNA

Alphabetical register of seamen, 1835-1844--class BT119--index to BT 112. FHL, TNA

Register of fishing apprentices, Port of Grimsby, 1880-1937 FHL, TNA

Register of seamen's tickets, 1845-1854 (BT113) and alphabetical register of seamen's tickets, 1845-1854 (BT114) FHL, TNA

Additional Archives for Merchant Maritime Records:

Ireland:

Irish Merchant Seamen - 12,000 Irish merchant seamen, taken from the C10 record cards for 1918 to 1923 at Southampton City RO.

Hull (Yorkshire):

Hull Seamens & General Orphanage see FHL fiche #6074082

Humber ports of the British Transport Docks Board FHL see fiche #6027602

Liverpool (Lancashire):

- Crew lists and agreements were completed for every British vessel before each voyage. The lists include crew names, ages, places of birth and various other details and are useful sources for the history of seamen's careers.
- They have a sample of crew lists, 1863-1913, with an alphabetical index of ships' names. A national project to index a sample of these lists by seamen's names called CLIP (Crew List Index Project) has led to a cd-rom being produced which includes references to 269,000 seafarers. A copy is available in The Liverpool Record Office.
- Crew lists are also held by the National Archives (10% sample of crew lists and log books), the National Maritime Museum, London and the Maritime History

St John's Newfoundland Archive

The website for the Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's, Newfoundland, Canada, containing hundreds of thousands of seafarer entries, is:

<http://www.mun.ca/mha/holdings/searchcombinedcrews.php> .

How to Search the Family History Library Catalog:

- “Keyword Search”: a) “Board of Trade” b) seamen indexes c) Merchant marine d) “deaths at sea”, e) Britain
- “Place Search”: “Great Britain”, “England”, “Ireland”, Scotland
- “Place Search”: under the port place-name
- “Place Search”: under name of county and highlight/click “Merchant Marine”
- Include “index” in your search to find published or online indexes

Smoother ‘sailing’ to you, now, as you seek to trace your merchant marine ancestors in these wonderful records!